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HIGH PROFILE SPECIAL OPERATIONS MISSIONS AND TIMING: IDENTIFYING
THE CULMINATING POINT OF EXECUTION

by

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SEMINAR 5

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by
the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy

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Abstract of

High Profile Special Operations Missions and Timing: Identifying the Culminating Point of Execution

In deciding a course of action for a high-profile special operation, such as a hostage rescue, one assumes that the principles of operational warfare are the most important planning factors. However, a thorough analysis of the operational factors—time, space, and forces (friendly and enemy)—will determine whether to execute the rescue immediately, with little information, or wait until more information is available.

The best time to execute a high-profile special operations mission is later in the crisis. A later execution allows for critical mission preparation and planning which presents the best moment to execute a rescue, offering the most opportunity for success.

The concept of the culminating point of execution proposes that there is a period in time when a special operation is most likely to succeed. This period presents itself after analyzing time and the following factors; force (the JTF), force (the terrorists), intelligence, and political resolve. Using this theory it can be shown that operational success is greater when a rescue mission is initiated during the culminating point of execution.

The resultant analysis provides the JTF commander with the best time to execute the rescue mission with the highest probability of success. This analysis should be instituted into the program of instruction at each services' in-extremis operations course.

Introduction

In deciding a course of action for a high-profile special operation, such as a hostage rescue, one assumes that the principles of operational warfare are the most important planning factors (see figure 1). However, a thorough analysis of the operational factors—time, space, and forces (friendly and enemy)—will determine whether to execute the rescue immediately, with little information, or wait until more information is available. The major decision facing the joint task force commander is *when* to execute the rescue operation.

(figure 1)

Principles of Operational Warfare:	Principles of Special Operations:
Mass Objective Offensive Security Economy of Force Maneuver Unity of Command Surprise * Joint Pub 3-0	Surprise Speed Simplicity Security Violence of Action * ST 31-20-6-1

Key principles in planning a hostage rescue operation

The best time to execute a high-profile special operations mission is later in the crisis. A later execution allows for critical mission preparation and planning which presents the best moment to execute a rescue, offering the most opportunity for success.

Hostage rescue operations are the most difficult of special operations missions.¹ Hostage rescue missions are surgical strikes, designed to minimize the loss of life, and return the hostages unharmed. They are often planned and executed at the joint task force (JTF) level but the results normally possess strategic implications. Failures at Desert One and the 1972 Olympics exemplify the high-risk nature of such operations.²

The JTF staff must consider the operational warfare and special operations principles when evaluating each course of action. These principles are surprise, speed, simplicity, and a violence of action. Regardless of the situation, these principles should be incorporated into every hostage rescue operation.

Surprise is the key principle of the rescue operation. The JTF must develop a plan that incorporates surprise. It allows the rescue force the initial advantage and throws the enemy off balance-- important, as many assault forces are numerically out-numbered. Operational intelligence identifies the enemy's critical vulnerabilities and possible ways for the commander to employ surprise.³ The JTF staff achieves surprise through speed and a violence of action.

Speed refers to how quickly the force can neutralize the enemy and secure the objective (hostages). Speed is a critical principle.

Violence of action refers to the massing of effects and capabilities (combat power) used to overcome the enemy at the decisive place in time.

A rescue operation must be simple. The easier a course of action is, the greater chance it has to succeed. These four principles, alone, do not dictate the best time to execute a rescue mission.

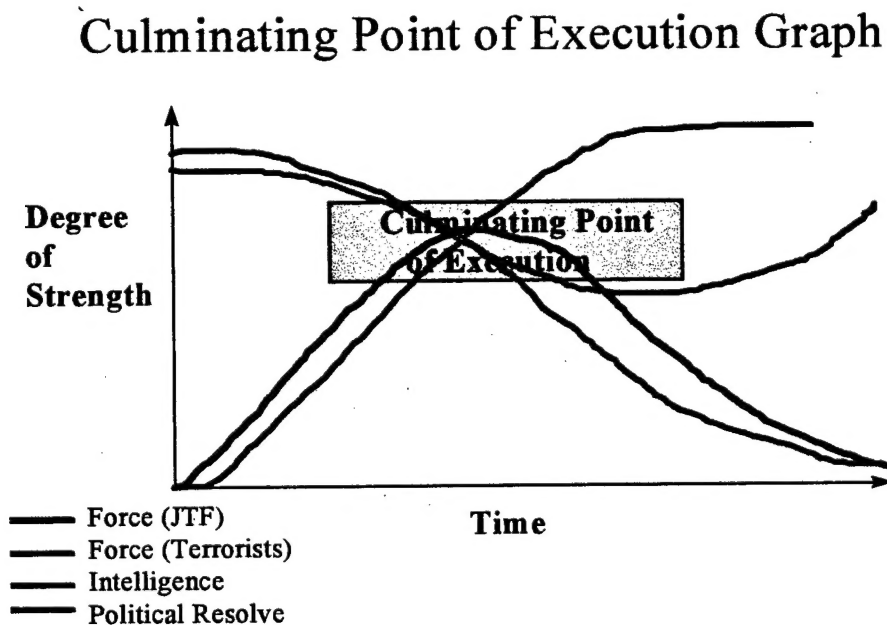
The operational commander may evaluate his courses of action against the operational warfare or special operations principles, but without analyzing the operational factors, the JTF commander will not have identified the best time to execute the rescue operation. Thus, a well-trained rescue force executing a well-planned operation utilizing the above principles will fail if it does not execute the mission at the correct time.

The JTF commander must consider other factors in evaluating his courses of action and determining when to execute the operation. These factors are more important in analyzing

whether a course of action will succeed or not. The measure of operational success is greater when a rescue mission is initiated at the culminating point of execution, determined after an evaluation of four critical factors.⁴

The Culminating Point of Execution Graph demonstrates the relationship of two operational factors, time and force, as well as the factors intelligence and political resolve (figure 2). The graph and its' properties are derived from the study of six rescue operations, highlighted by historical examples in each section. The graph is not a quantitative tool for measurement but serves as a means to present the theory and demonstrate the proven ability of special operations units in hostage rescue operations. The theory proposes that there is a period in time when a special operation is most likely to succeed. This period in time presents itself after considering the following factors; force (the JTF), force (the terrorists), intelligence, and political resolve.

(figure 2)



NOTE: The X-axis of the graph represents the 'Degree of Strength' of the factors. The further north along the axis the greater the strength. The Y-axis represents time. The further east on the axis represents greater time, or later during a crisis. Time could be hours, minutes, or days, but is stated in general terms to simply show that over time strength of the various factors change. Time is the most important operational factor, especially within a crisis action planning sequence. Time can never be recovered.

Force (JTF) refers to friendly forces and their preparation for the rescue attempt. This preparation includes organizing the JTF, deploying it into the crisis area, and complete task force rehearsals conducted in as realistic a scenario as possible. The commander must determine how long it will take to employ his forces in the most decisive manner. The JTF commander must consider how long will it take for those units to arrive at the crisis area? Also, he must evaluate the mobility assets available and determine if more are needed. Finally, the JTF must determine what intelligence assets are available within the theater and determine if that support is sufficient.

The graph shows that initially the readiness of the task force is unprepared. This is not to say that the force itself is weak, but rather, that the force is not ready to attack this specific target. They have not had time to practice on a mock-up or conducted coordinated rehearsals with all elements taking part in the rescue attempt, including contingencies. Readiness gets better over time until it begins to degrade. Due to fatigue, units of this specialized purpose cannot be maintained at a high alert level for long periods of time and expected to execute flawlessly.

The JTF's early preparation phase can be perceived as a critical weakness by terrorist organizations. Terrorists can take advantage of this by attempting to hasten the culminating point, or force early intervention by executing or moving the hostages. However, JTFs organized and exercised during peace will ensure a smooth transition during a crisis situation.

The JTF commander should know from peacetime exercises how long it will take and how best to employ his forces.

Force (terrorists) is both the readiness of the terrorists at the hostage site and the degree to which they remain steadfast on the resolve of their principles. The JTF must weigh and analyze the situation as it unfolds. Also, the JTF must know how stalemate or negotiations effect the terrorist organization's initial goals and objectives, i.e. will they crumble, or strengthen? One of the most important questions that must be answered about the terrorist organization is what are their goals? What is their resolve to accomplish these goals? Will the hostage takers risk death to achieve their goals or are they merely making a political statement? Initially, hostage-takers are very organized and united in their objective. As the hostage situation drags on, their level of security slackens, they set patterns, and often befriend the hostages. The Tupac Amaru Rebels that controlled the Japanese Ambassadors residence in Peru, initially made very specific demands and stated their resolve to execute hostages if the demands weren't met. As the crisis continued and their demands were not met, the rebels' threats decreased. When Peruvian assault forces began "Operation Chauvin de Guantar," they were met by many of the young rebels attempting to give up.⁵ The terrorists were not mentally prepared to defend a rescue attempt. Thus, the graph shows that over time their strength weakens.

Intelligence refers to the amount of information gathered on the target, the hostages, and terrorists. Intelligence considers both factor time and space. Without an established intelligence infrastructure within theater, it could take considerable time for the commander to locate the hostages. In that case, time is sacrificed as intelligence-gathering assets are inserted into, or developed, within the theater. Typically, intelligence collection in the early stages of a

hostage situation is slow. Critical information requirements such as who the organization is, what their motives and history are, how they are organized, their strengths/weaknesses, and who trained them, must be answered before forces can thoroughly plan a rescue mission. Often, this information is only gathered through human sources familiar with the terrorist organization. Thus, the graph shows that intelligence is initially weak but gets proportionally stronger with time.

As the crisis continues, the intelligence process discerns the most advantageous time to assault. After locating where Red Brigade terrorists held Marine Brigadier General Dozier, Italian rescue forces noted that each morning at that same time, all but one guard departed the safe house. The next day, the rescue force waited until only one terrorist was inside with the General and initiated their rescue. They simply walked to the front door and knocked. The lone terrorist thought one of his compatriots had returned unexpectedly and answered the door. The Italians knocked him unconscious, rescued General Dozier, and withdrew without any casualties.⁶

The JTF is very reliant upon intelligence during the initial phase of crisis action planning. Terrorist organizations can take advantage of this weakness by forcing an early execution or simply disappearing into a well-organized security system. If the JTF commander cannot locate the hostages or infiltrate the organization to gather intelligence, then he might be forced to succumb to the terrorists' demands. During peace, intelligence organizations must infiltrate terrorist groups with human assets to develop an intelligence profile. This profile can be taken off the shelf and provided to the JTF early in the planning sequence.

Political resolve is the strength, or lack thereof, for a nation to endure a hostage situation. The national political leadership must attempt to maintain public support and opinion

throughout the crisis, or face political disaster. This is depicted on the graph by a wavering line. As a hostage situation continues, the political leadership is responsible for maintaining popular support.

The operational commander must consider political resolve when preparing for a hostage rescue and public opinion after the rescue is complete. First, the commander must understand that nations such as the US and Israel that refuse to negotiate with terrorists limit the amount of preparation time available for a rescue operation. Therefore, counter-terrorist forces must be kept constantly ready and capable to execute with little warning or preparation and cannot count on negotiations, or a stalemate, to prepare. Again, regular JTF exercises contribute to a more ready force.

Second, perceived national weakness and political ineffectiveness play an important role in determining when to execute a rescue mission. The commander must realize he could, in fact, be directed when to execute the rescue attempt. He must be aware of the personality of the ambassador of the nation where the hostages are held. Will the ambassador expect a hasty military operation or will he work with the commander to provide the time necessary for the JTF to prepare? Clausewitz describes the interaction between war and policy as follows, "We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means."⁷ COL (Ret) Charlie Beckwith, ground force commander at Desert One, said that the choice to act "is always a political decision; it's not, nor should it be, a military one."⁸ After a six-month stalemate with Iran, President Carter decided to proceed with a rescue attempt because "national honor was at stake and that we ought to go ahead (with the rescue) without delay."⁹ Further, Carter remarked that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt had warned him that the United States'

international standing was suffering from "excessive passivity."¹⁰ Months of setbacks and frustrations proved detrimental to America's position as a world power as well as Carter's presidency and forced him to take action.¹¹

Later Execution

When counter-terrorist planners have time on their side, preparations and planning become more detailed and the probability of success is higher. The advantage of waiting to conduct a rescue is that more intelligence is collected, the operation can be planned in detail, and that the rescue unit has time to conduct more thorough and realistic rehearsals. Further, executing later allows for the natural degradation of the will and readiness of the captors. The JTF commander uses the factor time to his advantage.

Information is initially raw, but over time serves to paint a clearer picture of the situation within the crisis area. Normally, pilot teams within the country gather initial information for the JTF commander. Satellite imagery can tell the JTF the amount of activity at the crisis area over a period of time. Communications intelligence enables the commander to listen-in on the hostage-takers' conversations. From these intercepted communications, trained analysts can develop a snapshot of the situation, to include determining the number of terrorists and their motives. Human intelligence can provide the location of hostages, terrorists, and other specifics the tactical commanders will require. Information takes time to collect and process into intelligence. Intelligence mitigates unknown factors and identifies objectives, simplifying the task force's rescue plan. From watching news reports and interviews with the hostage takers, planners of "Operation Eagle Claw" noticed that as the crisis continued, their security began to get sloppy.¹² During the initial seizure of the US Embassy, the Iranians were seen

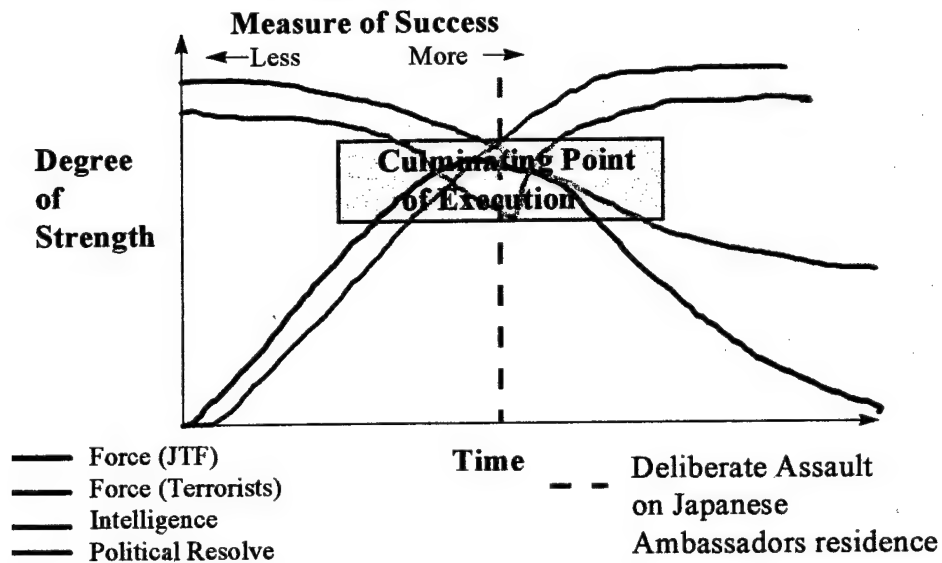
carrying weapons in a ready position. After months of stalemate, they were seen going about day-to-day business without weapons. Gary Sick, author of All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran, states, "One of the most hopeful signs was the gradual relaxation of security by the militants guarding the embassy. They were not professional, and as the immediate threat of US military action receded, they lowered their guard."¹³

In December 1996, Tupac Amaru Revolutionary rebels, dressed as waiters and waitresses, infiltrated and defeated a substantial guard force, securing several hundred dignitaries within a few minutes at the Japanese Embassy in Peru. Microphones and infrared sensors placed inside the Ambassador's residence during months of visits by aid workers provided a precise picture of the daily regimen during the hostage crisis. Covertly placed inside the residence, these monitoring devices uncovered patterns set by the terrorists.¹⁴ Planners were able to learn that everyday at a specific time, all but a couple of guards played soccer in the downstairs reception area. Using this valuable piece of information, rescue planners timed their assault to capture most of the guards playing soccer while a token force was left to guard the hostages (see figure 3).

Prime Minister Fujimori succeeded because he executed within the culminating point of execution. He waited until the rescue force had the best opportunity for success.

(figure 3)

Culminating Point of Execution With Measures of Success



In waiting to execute a rescue, Peruvian counter-terrorist experts greatly improved the chance of a successful operation. The Peruvians used time to strengthen the rescue force. They were able to conduct live, full-dress rehearsals on mock-ups built to scale and in extreme detail. The assault force had the time to train extensively with the FBI prior to the assault and were well prepared to execute the mission. Their strength is high on the graph but seen as starting to lower, partly due to the fact that they had spent several days under the residence in tunnels, waiting for the signal to execute.¹⁵

The readiness of the terrorists is shown as weakening since over time they relaxed their security posture and set easily identified patterns in their day-to-day activities.

Intelligence is shown as continuing to strengthen. With the help of U.S. eavesdropping equipment, the Peruvian government was able to pinpoint the exact hostage locations.

Political resolve is shown within the culminating point of execution but is on a weakening trend. Fujimori was under a great deal of pressure by his cabinet and the Japanese

government, which still had very senior diplomats inside the residence. The Japanese government wanted Fujimori to negotiate a deal with the terrorists. Over time this pressure forces leaders to attempt a rescue, broker a deal with the terrorists, or develop a plan to strengthen public opinion. Fujimori authorized the rescue attempt and after it's success, his political support gained strength.

Unfortunately, executing later allows the terrorist to perfect his intelligence on the JTF. His assets will have the time to establish intelligence networks concentrating on the JTF. OPSEC and strict counter-intelligence efforts must be stressed within the JTF to ensure the terrorist organization does not receive any information the JTF does not want him to have.

Early Execution

In theory, the best time to assault is immediately after the capture of hostages. At this point terrorists would be the least prepared with the least amount of defense. It is impossible, however, to conduct an assault immediately after hostages have been seized. Terrorist organizations have become proficient in the conduct of hostage taking. Establishment of internal security elements, meticulous planning, and near perfect execution characterize present-day hostage-taking operations. Further, many geographic CINCs lack an in-extremis capability and rely on outside support for such operations. Thus, execution would be contingent upon when an in-extremis unit could be deployed into theater. Executing an early assault also means that the rescuers have a poor knowledge of what the target looks like. Important information such as where the hostages and terrorists are located and the layout of the target are critical pieces of information the JTF must provide the tactical commander.

Even in 1982, terrorist organizations were adept at devising ways to thwart rescue attempts. After seizing Brigadier General Dozier, Italian Red Brigade terrorists used a series of safe houses to move their hostage and deny Italian police the capability to pinpoint his location. The Red Brigade realized that they must use factor space, a combination of secure safe houses, to elude detection by the police. When Italian counter-terrorist units were ready to conduct an assault months later, they were monitoring more than 200 terrorist safe houses. Thus, nations must utilize human intelligence assets during peacetime to highlight a terrorist organization's internal security system so that if a crisis would evolve, they could identify possible hostage locations.

"Operation Jonathon," the Israeli raid at Entebbe Airport, serves as one of the greatest high-profile special operations success stories. Israeli planners, skilled in the conduct of counter-terrorist operations, concluded "it took months to prepare for an operation of this magnitude. They were concerned about the shortage of intelligence, the lack of proper training, the unreliability of the vehicles, and the harried nature of the entire preparations."¹⁶ Though pressured by the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, to react quickly, Jonathon Netanyahu, the Israeli Assault Force Commander, did not want to execute a hostage-rescue operation right away.¹⁷ He was able to ease political pressure by assuring his force would be ready within the week. Seven days of rehearsals and intelligence collection provided the necessary time to prepare and the mission was successful. Further, General James Vaught, the Task Force Commander of "Operation Eagle Claw," felt he couldn't even attempt a rescue operation for weeks after the crisis because he lacked adequate intelligence.¹⁸ And in criticizing the US failure at Desert One, retired special operations commander Major General John Singlaub believed that the rescue failed because it had been hurriedly organized.¹⁹ The

lesson here is that JTFs cannot be stood-up with an ad-hoc organization and expected to perform without error. Joint task forces must be organized and exercised in training as it would in crisis.

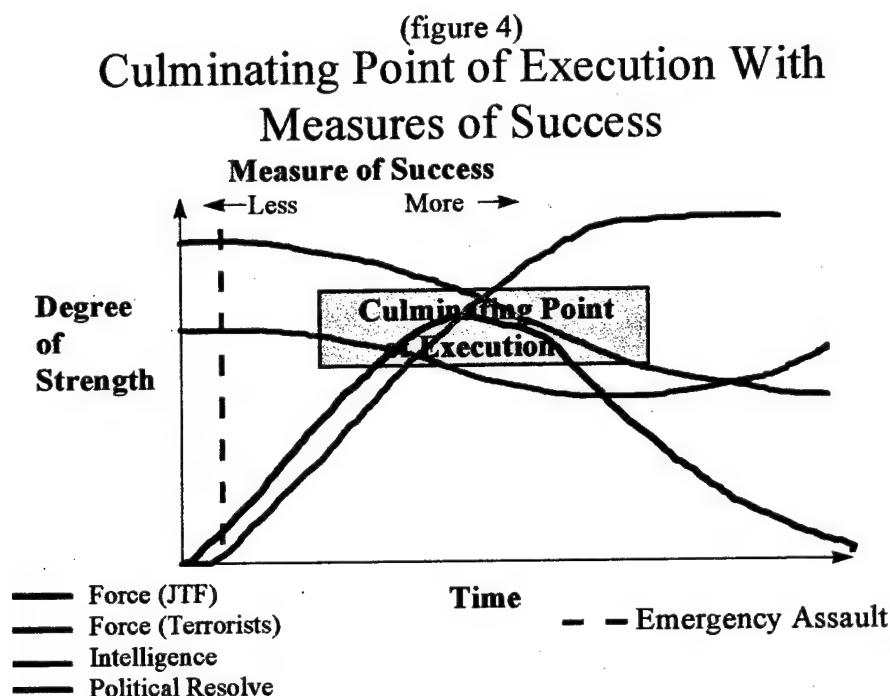
Hostage takers maintain the operational leverage—the hostages. *Operational leverage*, a term developed within this theory, is defined as an object whose control or preservation is so important to one combatant that they would take great risk or loss to maintain it. For example, if a terrorist organization began executing hostages, a task force might be forced into conducting an assault before they were ready, negating the advantage of time.

One such situation occurred during the 1972 Olympics, held in Munich, Germany. Arab terrorists entered the Israeli team's living area in the Olympic Village, immediately killing two athletes, and taking an additional nine prisoner. They demanded the release of more than 230 Arab and German terrorists held in Israel and Germany.²⁰ As German police units readied an assault, German politicians attempted to negotiate a peaceful settlement. However, Israel refused to negotiate with the terrorists and after three deadlines, the terrorists demanded air transport immediately. They threatened to execute the athletes one-by-one until their demands were met.

German counter-terrorist units were now forced into an emergency plan. Manfred Schreiber, the Munich Police Commissioner and de-facto commander of the rescue attempt, determined that in order to conduct a successful rescue, they had to assault before the terrorists loaded the plane.²¹ Without knowing the number of terrorists they would face, German police units (GSG-9) would have to rescue the hostages at the airport just as the terrorists and hostages loaded an aircraft for their escape. Forced into executing a rescue at the wrong time and not in a place of their choosing, GSG-9 was destined for failure. Snipers

began the assault on the open tarmac but missed their initial shots. Further, there were three more terrorists than the GSG-9 had planned. GSG-9 did not employ enough sniper elements to effectively neutralize the terrorists. In the ensuing firefight, all nine hostages were killed.

Because the assault force had to react to the movement of the hostages, they were not able to execute during the culmination point of execution (see figure 4).



The graph shows that the assault force could not use time to their advantage. The force was a well-trained unit yet did not have adequate time to prepare for this mission. They were unable to conduct the proper rehearsals and preparation. Intelligence was poor. The assault element thought there would only be five terrorists at the airfield instead of the eight they encountered.²² Without the time to determine exactly how many terrorists they would face, the force planned and executed blindly. The terrorists were strong. They were very alert and very much ready for an assault. Political will to end the crisis on German soil was so strong that it became a contributing factor forcing an early execution.²³ Executing later would have made the odds for a successful operation greater. It is important to note that planning for an

emergency-type assault takes time also. American planners needed 12 days to develop an emergency plan after the embassy in Iran was seized.²⁴ This aids in the collection of intelligence but pushes the earliest point when the JTF is ready to conduct a rescue further from the time the hostages are taken.

Though it might seem that attacking a terrorist organization quickly, before it settles into a routine is a better option, early execution of a rescue mission is often not feasible. Executing early does not allow for the natural degradation of security on the target, a key factor, as small rescue forces must use surprise to the fullest advantage.

Conclusion

The major planning consideration involving a hostage rescue operation is *when* to execute the rescue. Operational planners and leaders must determine whether to execute the rescue immediately, with little information, or wait until more information is available. Here lies the dilemma.

The best time to execute a high-profile Special Operations mission is later in the crisis. A later execution allows for critical mission preparation and planning which presents the best moment to execute a rescue, offering the greatest opportunity for success.

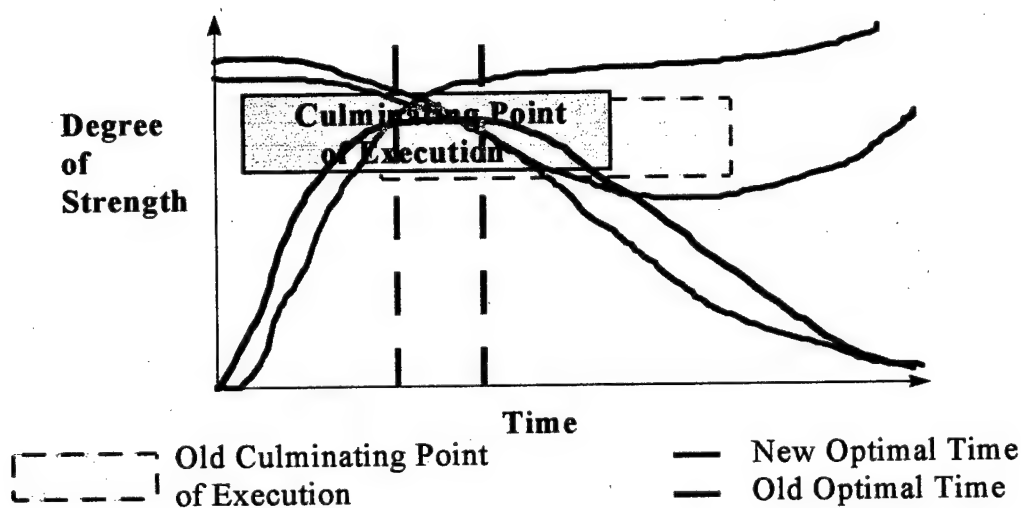
The concept of the culminating point of execution demonstrates the relationship of four critical factors and their influence on the outcome of a special operations mission. The graph is not a quantitative tool for measurement but serves as a means to present the theory and demonstrates the "peak" for use of SOF. The theory proposes that there is a period in time when a special operation is most likely to succeed. This period presents itself after analyzing time and the following factors; force (the JTF), force (the terrorists), intelligence, and political

resolve. Using this theory it can be shown that operational success is greater when a rescue mission is executed nearest the culminating point of execution.

The question for future consideration is how can JTFs bring the culminating point of execution closer to the point when the hostages have been seized (see figure 5)?

(figure 5)

Future Culminating Point of Execution



Joint task forces must be organized and exercised in peacetime. This promotes quicker response and planning as depicted in the graph by a more vertical pattern. Aggressive information and intelligence gathering initiatives by human sources before a crisis must also be adopted. Many questions and analysis regarding a terrorist organization can be answered during peacetime, before a crisis situation. OPSEC should be emphasized and enforced within every operation, peacetime or real world to ensure the enemy does not receive information that the JTF does not want him to receive. The operational factor time must be analyzed in relation to forces (friendly and enemy), intelligence, and political resolve. The resultant analysis provides the JTF commander with the optimal time to execute the rescue mission with

the highest probability of success. This analysis of the four factors, and the culminating point of execution, should be instituted into the program of instruction at each services' in-extremis operations courses, providing commanders with the knowledge to best determine when a hostage rescue operation should be executed.

NOTES

1. William H. McRaven, The Theory Of Special Operations (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School 1993), 576.
2. Desert One was the initial landing zone where special operations forces were to refuel and continue their raid into Iran. The mission was to free American hostages held at the embassy in Tehran. During refueling operations, wind gusts forced a RH-53D into a C-130 tanker. The resulting explosion and fire killed eight Americans. The German counter-terrorist group, Bundesgrenzschutzgruppe-9 (GSG-9), suffered similar consequences when nine hostages were killed during a failed rescue attempt at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany.
3. William H. McRaven, The Theory Of Special Operations (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School 1993), 27.
4. The term 'Culminating Point of Execution' is derived from Clausewitz's theory of the 'Culminating Point of Victory.' Clausewitz explains that there is a time when one opponent has the strength to force victory on his opponent. If he does not take advantage of his strength at this point, he will weaken and his enemy will become stronger. Thus, the 'Culminating Point of Execution' proposes that there is a period when initiating a rescue operation would have the greatest opportunity for success.
5. "Report: Bodies of Peru Rebels Show Signs of Execution," CNN Interactive, 24 April 1997, <<http://cnn.com/WORLD/9704/24/peru/index.html>> (27 January 1999), 2.
6. Leroy Thompson, The Rescuers-The World's Top Anti-Terrorist Units (Boulder: Paladin Press 1986), 82.
7. Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1976), 99.
8. Charlie A. Beckwith and Donald Knox, Delta Force (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1983), 184.
9. Paul B Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission-Why It Failed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1985), 49.
10. Ibid.
11. Gary Sick, All Fall Down-America's Tragic Encounter With Iran (New York: Random House 1985), 296.
12. James H. Kyle and John Robert Eidson, The Guts To Try (New York: Orion 1990), 90.
13. Gary Sick, All Fall Down-America's Tragic Encounter With Iran (New York: Random

House 1985), 282.

14. "Rescue Planned To The Millimeter," CNN Interactive, 23 April 1997, <<http://cnn.com/WORLD/9704/15/peru/index.html>> (27 January 1999), 2.

15. Ibid.

16. William H. McRaven, The Theory Of Special Operations (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School 1993), 541.

17. Ibid.

18. Paul B Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission-Why It Failed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1985), 33.

19. Ibid, 133.

20. Alexander B Calahan, "The Israeli Response To The 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre And The Development Of Independent Covert Action Teams," E-Prints, April 1995, <<http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm>> (4 January 1999), 6.

21. Ibid, 7.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. James H. Kyle and John Robert Eidson, The Guts To Try (New York: Orion 1990), 50.

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